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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SKOPJE 000377

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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: NEW DEBATE ON USE OF LANGUAGE HEATING UP

Classified By: AMBASSADOR REEKER FOR REASONS 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: New Democracy (ND) leader Imer Selmani's request for more complete implementation in parliament of the law that outlines the use of minority languages has escalated to a wider debate in Parliament. An unlikely alliance between ND and governing coalition partner DUI is now seeking to force parliament to address the issue, using legislation critical to EU accession to push their demands through. PM Gruevski's ruling VMRO and DUI are quietly negotiating a compromise. Meanwhile, DPA leader Menduh Thaci has drafted a more expansive language law to replace existing legislation entirely and turned up his radical rhetoric. The resulting debate has become heated and divisive. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) PM Gruevski invited the leaders of SDSM, DUI, DPA and ND to a July 25 leaders meeting to discuss EU integration. It was the first leaders meeting invitation for ND leader Imer Selmani, who immediately shook things up by insisting on a more complete implementation of the language law which was championed by DUI and adopted in July 2008. ND's MPs have since explained that they want plenary sessions in parliament to be chaired in Albanian (in addition to Macedonian) and all written materials in parliament to be bilingual. DUI MPs have joined forces with ND, insisting that parliament become completely bilingual. Their joint proposal calls for these features to be incorporated in the new law on parliament, passage of which -- prior to September 15 -- is an EU benchmark. Further complicating the matter, DUI MPs are demanding that adoption of the law on parliament be subject to a Badinter majority, which requires for a majority vote in favor of the legislation amongst the ethnic minority MPs in addition to an overall parliamentary majority, essentially holding EU progress hostage until their demands on language are met.

¶3. (SBU) Not to be outdone, DPA leader Menduh Thaci (who boycotted the July 25 leaders meeting) is calling for the current language law to be scrapped completely and has drafted new legislation which would require use of the Albanian language in all official contexts throughout Macedonia. DPA's new draft law on language is basically an extension of the demands DPA included in its proposed "New Political Contract on Macedonian-Albanian Relations," which DPA presented to the public in June as a proposed replacement for the Ohrid Framework Agreement. The "New Contract" states that, "Albanians and Macedonians should guarantee official use of the Albanian language, without abusive segregation." DPA has threatened to boycott parliament if its "New Contract" and draft language law continue to be ignored. Thaci's increasingly inflammatory rhetoric also included calls this week for future Macedonian governments to have a dual Prime Minister system, one representing each of the two largest ethnic groups.

¶4. (C) According to press, Selmani's request on the use of language at the July 25 leaders meeting sparked little

initial reaction. All of the leaders agreed after the meeting that their most important combined objective should be meeting the benchmarks set forth by the EU. However, the debate has heated up significantly since, especially following DUI's threat to vote down the draft Law on Parliament if it does not contain their amendments on the use of language. Ruling VMRO party whip Silvana Boneva told the Ambassador July 29 that she was disappointed with DUI's actions, insisting that changes on the use of the Albanian language should not be included in the law and serve only to damage the EU integration process. An unnamed VMRO official was quoted in July 30 press reports as saying DUI's stance on bilingualism in parliament implies the federalization of Macedonia. The Macedonian Orthodox church has even weighed in on the debate, publicly requesting that the names of places in Macedonia no longer be altered from their Macedonian form. For example, "Skopje" is commonly written as "Shkupi" in Albanian.

15. (C) PM Gruevski's chief of staff, Martin Protoger, told us July 31 that a parliamentary working group has been created to seek a compromise, and asked us to weigh in with both DUI and ND toward that end. (We are quietly urging all sides to compromise.) He thought these talks would succeed. Meantime, the major e-Macedonian opposition party, SDSM, is sitting this one out, no doubt enjoying the discomfort within the ruling VMRO-DUI coalition.

16. (C) Comment: ND and then DUI, astutely chose to attach use of the Albanian language to legislation which the VMRO leadership is anxious to pass, both to meet EU requirements and to give parliament a few weeks of summer leave. Both

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sides of the ethnic divide have strong sentiments on this subject. Selmani launched the debate to attract wider support from the ethnic-Albanian community, figuring he could rally support by standing up to the government while simultaneously humiliating DUI by highlighting the limitations of the law it pushed through last year. DUI leaders, understanding their predicament, realized they needed to jump into the debate as well or it would be portrayed as weak, creating an uncomfortable DUI-ND alliance. While displeased, VMRO may be content to use the debate on language to deflect attention away from the name issue as the primary barrier to Euro-Atlantic integration. And of course, this is a perfect grandstanding issue for Thaci, who is desperately trying to stay politically relevant. REEKER